

Exiled to avert civil war, Helen Andros learns life-altering energy-manipulation skills that could change the balance of power in Azgard. As the plot against her father reaches its tragic conclusion, she flees unknown assailants on a mission to abduct her.

Outcast--Green Stone of Healing(R) Book Four

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Green Stone of Healing® Series
Outcast

Book Four
By C.L. Talmadge

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Published by HealingStone Books
907 Sycamore Lane
Lancaster, Texas 75146-1451
www.greenstoneofhealing.com

Cover Design: Pat Virzi
Kwik Kopy Digiprint • DeSoto, Texas

ISBN: 978-0-9800537-8-4

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Produced in the United States of America

CHAPTER TWELVE

Although not fully recovered, the youth got out of bed. Donning the mended and cleaned shirt and trousers he found on a wall peg, he crept to the door of the bedroom across the hall from the lodge's mudroom. He listened until he heard Helen go upstairs.

Hustling into the kitchen, he grabbed his sister's hand. "Come on. We can't stay here any longer."

"No, Rik!" the little girl protested. "I don't want to go."

Her older brother impelled her toward the back door, trying to shush her at the same time. He reached for the knob and stopped short, dark eyes wide. Major blocked the way. At the dog's rumbling growl, the boy let go of his sister. Neither child dared move or make a sound.

A basket of laundry under her arm, Helen came downstairs to discover the stalemate. She set the container in the mudroom and entered the kitchen. "Leaving so soon?"

"Does your dog bite?" the boy whispered.

"Only those who need it," Helen replied. "Do you need it?"

He shook his head. His sister broke away and ran to her rescuer. Seeing the child's tears, Helen gathered the little girl into her arms.

"I don't want to go," Deborah sobbed. "I like you, Helen. I want to stay with you. Don't make me leave."

Helen returned her hug and wiped her face with a hand towel. "No one's going to make you leave, Sweetie. You can stay here with me as long as you like. It's time for lunch."

She put the little girl down and motioned to Major, who settled, paws crossed, in front of the door. Helen served up sandwiches and soup for three and invited the boy to partake. The smells of baked ham and beef broth won over the bony youth, who sat beside his sister and ate in hostile silence.

Pretending to ignore him while chatting with the little girl, Helen

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was taken aback to recognize herself in the lad's sullen manner. He was behaving much the way she did when she first found herself in her father's house, confused, overwrought, and suspicious. Like reeling in a fish, she would have to let him exhaust himself with his emotions before she could gain his attention and start to earn his trust.

Washing the dishes with Deborah's help, Helen told Major to move away from the door. She stationed herself by the crackling hearth with Deborah on her lap, reading to the little girl, whose brother appeared to be listening. He shot out of his chair and rushed for the exit, grabbing several extra slices of bread off the counter. He stuffed them into his pocket and dashed outside.

Deborah called out after him and started to cry. Helen took the child upstairs to put her down for a nap, singing to her until she stopped weeping.

"Will Rik come back?" Deborah asked, her tear-stained eyes half-closed.

"I expect so, but it may take a while," Helen replied. "He won't go far. Don't fret, Sweetie. I found him before and I can find him again. He just has to think things through for himself."

Helen spent the little girl's naptime sewing on a surprise for her made possible by Marlin's generous foresight.

Rain lashed the lodge's walls and roof; lightning slit open the darkness again and again. A terrified Deborah huddled in the arms of Helen, who sat by the kitchen hearth and rocked her back and forth, grateful for the warmth and protection provided by the dwelling, wondering where the little girl's brother was sheltering. *You are one stubborn boy.*

The rain continued into late morning. Toward noon, Major went to the kitchen door, sniffing and whining. Helen took the dog outside to investigate. They found the lad curled up under the stairway, his

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teeth chattering. He did not object when Helen helped him to his feet and back into the lodge.

Helen washed and dried his clothes while the boy took a hot shower. After they all ate, she insisted that he sit still so she could she examine his wound and replace the drenched, soiled bandage. Sensing that he was not willing to speak while his sister was within hearing, she took Deborah upstairs for a nap.

Back in the kitchen, Helen sat at the table, watching the youth carry logs inside to replenish the firebox by the hearths, both upstairs and in the kitchen. He became frustrated with the limits on his ability to use his injured hand for the chore. He mumbled and cursed, trying to steady a stack of wood with just two fingers and a thumb. He finished the job and took the chair opposite hers, winded from the effort.

“Want to talk about it, Rik?” Helen asked.

“The name’s Jeriko.”

“I beg your pardon, Jeriko. Do you have a last name?”

“Sheen.”

“Where on earth are your parents, Jeriko Sheen?”

“Mother died last winter.”

“And your father?”

He sat glowering.

“Is he dead, too?”

“Might as well be.”

“What do you mean?”

He looked into Helen’s eyes, as though taking her measure. “If I tell you, will you promise to let my sister stay here?”

“I’ve already said she can stay as long as she wants,” Helen answered. “I would like for you to stay, too. I could use a man’s help. Thank you for filling the wood bins just now.”

Her last remark seemed to help him make up his mind. “My father’s the Sin-Eater. Folks turned their backs on us after he answered the Call. I sometimes think Mother died of a broken heart.”

Helen could not respond. The stranger who helped her save the

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boy's life must have been the children's father. Now she understood why he would not permit her to look at him.

The boy misunderstood her silence. "I'll go if you want, but you promised you wouldn't turn my sister away. And you have to promise not to tell her about Father. We told her he had to go away for a very long time. She won't understand why he's not with us if she finds out about him."

"I'm not turning either of you away," Helen managed to say, agreeing to say nothing to the little girl, at least until she was older. Helen had her own reasons for not being willing to shield the truth from Deborah forever.

In her turn, Helen felt honor-bound to explain her situation. She told him about the Temple's death mark that kept her separate from her father in much the same way as the Call had come between him and his parent. "Perhaps you might not want to have much to do with me."

He let out a derisive noise. "Flatlander priests. Their rules mean little here. Hill-folk have no use for them. Too nosy and bossy."

A thought occurred to Helen, who started to gather food and put it into a basket. "Where does your father stay now, Jeriko?"

"Up the hill, in a cave by the stream," the boy said. "It's not far. You shouldn't go there, though. He won't want to speak to you and you can't look at him."

Helen laid a fresh dishtowel over the top of the packed basket. "I have no intention of looking at him. But I can bring him food and I have to speak with him. Now that I know he's alive and where to find him, I must ask his permission to care for you both."

Attaching the lead to the dog's collar, Helen overruled the boy's objections and insisted on going, with or without his help.

The stream splashed and tumbled along the ridge of an outcrop, gathering into a deep pool on the eastern, lower edge. Half a mile

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down the mountain, the same watercourse bounded the southern edge of the lodge.

Jeriko pointed to a path that led toward two enormous boulders further up the slope. "The cave opening is between those rocks."

Helen thanked him and asked him to return to the lodge so that Deborah would not be alone when she awoke. Preceding Helen, Major pulled hard on his lead. When they reached the boulders, he whimpered and struggled against his restraint, as though eager to greet a friend. The beast's reaction confirmed Helen's good opinion of the man.

"Master Sheen?" she called out. "My name is Helen Andros. I must talk to you about your children."

"Stay where you are," a familiar voice replied from a distance. "You should not be here."

"I have some food for you, Master Sheen," Helen said. "I have no intention of violating your boundaries as Sin-Eater. But I must ask your permission as a father to keep Jeriko and Deborah with me in my household. They are still your children."

The voice now came from up close, as though the man stood on the other side of the boulder. "I would have thought you understood you had my approval when I helped you carry Jeriko to the cabin."

"I had no idea of your relationship to him," Helen said. "You were not very communicative about anything."

"No, I suppose not," he said ruefully. "I beg your pardon, Lady Justin. Living in solitude, I tend to forget my manners."

"You know who I am?"

He chuckled. "Even I in my isolation know who you are, Lady Justin. You have my undying gratitude for saving my son's life and for sheltering my children. I will never be able to thank you properly. You didn't have to do that."

"If you want to thank me, start by calling me Helen and telling me your name," she said. "And yes, I did have to do it. I had less than a day of unbearable solitude before I found Deborah. I cannot imagine how you endure yours."

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“Obediah is my name,” he said, adding nothing further.

“Surely there can be no harm in our speaking together from time to time,” Helen urged. “We can make sure that we never come in eye contact.”

The air seemed to crackle; the crisp outlines of the rocks became fuzzy. “The child of Kronos-Thunderhand has an excellent idea,” a disembodied voice said. “It will be much easier to teach both of you at once.”

The Mist-Weaver, finally in solid form, floated in such a way that Helen imagined he could be seen by both of them. “Teach us what, Maguari?” she demanded, exasperated and curious.

“You speak thus to the *Oonaki*?” the Sin-Eater inquired.

“Only when he annoys me, like when he drops in on a *private* conversation,” Helen shot back. “I gather you and he chat from time to time as well.”

“The *Oonaki* is the only one in the Hills who speaks directly to me,” the Sin-Eater said.

“The Mist-Weavers do not fear of being tainted by sin,” Maguari said. “That is a mistaken notion, based on a great misunderstanding of the Creator’s intent.”

Despite her determination to be miffed, Helen was intrigued, suspecting that the Mist-Weaver framed his comments to pique her interest.

“I give, Maguari. I’m hooked,” she said. “How shall we proceed from here? I should be getting back to the lodge soon. The children need their supper.”

“Return tomorrow, after what you call the midday,” Maguari said. “I will join you and we will speak. You have much to learn.”

Helen left the basket of food and went back to the lodge, full of anticipation about resuming her lessons in the steps of the *keura* from the Mist-Weaver. She was grateful to have another adult to talk with, even if she could not see him face to face.

After supper, she gave Deborah the surprise. It was a cloth doll that Helen had sewn with black buttons for eyes, black yarn for hair,

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and a dress with lots of ruffles. The little girl clasped the toy to her heart and danced in delight, refusing to go to sleep without the doll in her arm, tucked under the covers with her.

After Jeriko retired, Helen sat in the rocking chair for a long time before she became sleepy, recalling herself as a little girl desperately wanting a doll to play with and a father's love. *Some problems are so much easier to solve than others.*

Helen sat on one side of a mighty redwood. Obediah was on the other side, close yet shielded from her vision by a protrusion of the tree's trunk. A host of Mist-Weavers hovered in semicircular rows above their human counterparts. Helen could not help comparing them to a group of dark-green bottle stoppers bobbing in a rimless sink.

Maguari settled into his seated position. "We have decided that you both should attend this lesson in the state of consciousness most natural for your kind, since that is the state in which you make use of the *kura*."

The energy-master asked his students to recall the definition of the essence of energy. "As you have explained it, Master Maguari, it is the ability to love," Obediah said.

"Very good, Hope-Bringer," Maguari replied. "Of particular interest to the child of Kronos-Thunderhand is that which diminishes the ability to love, thus becoming the ultimate source of the physical dis-ease that she seeks to heal."

Hugging her shawl closer to her shoulders, Helen replayed the bizarre session she had with the Mist-Weavers before leaving the Altair farmhouse. She made an intuitive connection. "It must have something to do with vibration, Master Maguari. You made such a point of that topic before we ended our last discussion."

His cackle-laugh was her reward. "Even better. Yes, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand, it has to do with vibration—or rather, that

which hampers vibration.

“Do recall that consciousness—what might be defined as that awareness of self as a being distinct from other beings—has its own rate of vibration. Each and every created being—the *Oonakim* included—consists of a vibrational frequency unmatched by any other created being’s frequency.”

Obediah ventured a query. “Is that how we find each other, Master Maguari? I never know how I manage to locate my children when I check up on them. My energy just seems to go right to them.”

Helen gasped, finally understanding how the Sin-Eater knew his son was in trouble. He no doubt used the *kuura* as she had to obtain a sense of the direction in which to search.

The Mist-Weaver’s cowl bounced up and down. “Indeed, yes, Hope-Bringer. We also recognize each soul’s vibration pattern from lifetime to lifetime, even though physical appearance changes. That is how we distinguish friend from foe, loved one from stranger.

“We know the Creator by vibration as well.”

Maguari lifted draped arms into a position of supplication and the other Mist-Weavers did likewise. “Feel now the vibrating energy-essence of the Creator,” he said.

Helen experienced the same warm subtle tingling that she had when Maguari had healed her wounds or tried to comfort her. Although it affected her entire body, it was strongest inside her heart. As the sensation became more focused and intense, she again saw a light, white and gold, surrounding her and the Mist-Weavers. It was breathtakingly glorious, filling once more that empty yearning space within her. Helen’s soul-deep longing for that light, to live within it, upheld and strengthened, came roaring back to her. It appeared so close and freely available; all she had to do was to reach out and claim it.

Something within her clamped down, as though some sort of implacable barrier slammed shut over her heart. Helen now felt distanced from that light, separated from the joy, hope, and affirmation that it offered to her. She knew without seeing that

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Obediah shed tears right along with her.

Why do I keep doing this? Helen wondered, wiping her eyes with her sleeve cuff. *Why do I cut myself off every time I feel that light?*

Maguari, arms lowered, gave off his purr-like sound. “Ahhhh. You show true insight, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand. You have discerned that you are the source of your disconnection from the Creator’s loving energy-essence. Most beings labor under the great misunderstanding that their Creator has cut them off.”

Helen, struggling to remain composed, heard a choking sob. Pulling a handkerchief from her pocket, she got to her knees and reached her hand around the trunk. “Thank you,” the Sin-Eater muttered, taking it from her.

She looked up at her teacher. “You do have a point to this happy demonstration?”

“My point is for you to be aware that you are feeling the effects of that which hampers the vibration of your own energy-essences,” the Mist-Weaver replied. “I speak here of self-judgment. Self-judgment is unique in that it does not vibrate. Whenever and wherever self-judgment becomes trapped in a being’s vibrating energy-essence, it reduces or even stops a part of the essence’s vibration rate. Reduced or stopped vibration of energy-essence is the ultimate origin of physical malady and of dis-ease of the emotions, the spirit, the mind.”

“I’m not sure I comprehend,” Helen said. “Perhaps you might supply some examples,” Obediah added.

The Mist-Weaver pointed at Helen. “You went riding with your parent a while ago, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand. When he told you of his pride in you and approval of your resolve to help your friend, you found it impossible to accept. So much so that your parent’s feelings even affected you physically. They made you faint. That reaction came from your own self-judgments that have determined you are not worthy of his love or approval.

“Is this not so?”

Helen could only nod. She wrapped her arms around her skirt-

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covered knees, bowed her head, and hugged tightly.

Maguari gestured toward Obediah. “Hope-Bringer, you and yours continue to pay the price for your need to prove yourself worthy of your Creator’s love and acceptance by taking on a burden that was never yours to bear. The very concept of sin results from self-judgment, as does the belief in the need for redemption. The Creator does not demand that one being suffer or be set apart so that the rest can be spared. Self-judgment imposes that demand and then pretends that it is holy.”

Obediah’s sobs stoked Helen’s anger over the pain and sacrifice of such a decent and caring man and his children. She turned her teacher’s words over and over in her mind, honing in on what he was not saying. “Then it would seem to me, Maguari, that true healing begins at the level of self-judgment. That is what you are implying, isn’t it?”

The Mist-Weaver shot up and down as though he were hopping; his cowl-enshrouded companions bobbed to and fro, excited. “You continue to demonstrate the abilities that so amazed and unnerved your professors, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand.”

“No changing the subject,” Helen retorted. “If self-judgment is the cause, what do we do about it? How do we change it? What do we change? It all sounds so strange.”

“That is a complicated question,” Maguari said. “Souls very often are not even aware that they have self-judgments. They experience only the effects and do not recognize the source, as you yourself have found in our discussion.

“Even when they do know, there is the issue of where self-judgment is located in the energy-essence. It is not possible merely to reason away a self-judgment. That is another misunderstanding among those who consider themselves highly spiritual. The thoughts closest to the surface of the mind involve only the electrical portion of energy-essence. But there is also magnetic energy-essence. Self-judgment is locked into the magnetic component of energy-essence and cannot be released without its consent and participation.”

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The Mist-Weaver seemed to sigh. Helen suspected that she and most likely Obediah must have been displaying totally blank, uncomprehending expressions.

“Let me phrase this in another fashion,” Maguari continued. “Very often what you call your mind is in total opposition to your heart. Logically you know you don’t want to feel certain emotions, or be fearful, yet you cannot seem to reason or talk yourself out of those emotions or move past your fears.”

Helen gulped. “True enough.”

“Those emotions, those fears, all stem from self-judgments locked into the magnetic portions of your energy-essence,” the Mist-Weaver said. “They cannot be changed or healed by logic or thought alone. Their needs are different.”

“Do you have a way to find and remove these self-judgments, Master Maguari?” Obediah asked.

“The *Oonakim* have turned their attention to just such a task, and we are making good progress,” his teacher said. “It is enough now for you to recognize that your energy-essence is both electrical and magnetic, and that pain and dis-ease originate in the portion of that essence wounded by self-judgment. Fuller understanding will come with time and further practical use of energy.”

Sensing his students’ raw emotional state, Maguari concluded the day’s session with a promise of a break in the course of study after a few more lessons.

Exhausted, Helen returned to the lodge to prepare supper, promising to bring the Sin-Eater more food the next day. In the evening she played simple word-games with Deborah, gradually teaching the little girl the letters of the alphabet in much the same way her own mother instructed her. Deborah’s older brother, refusing to participate, nonetheless observed closely. Helen ignored him, knowing she would have to earn his acceptance.

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After putting the child to bed, Helen tried to concentrate on sewing but could not focus. Jeriko brought logs into the house and restocked the downstairs fireboxes. Helen had to ask forcefully before he would allow her to examine the progress of his wounded hand.

“It’s mending well,” she told him, removing the last of the bandage. “Could you catch a few fish tomorrow? It would be a nice change from ham and beef.”

“Of course I can fish,” the boy said. “I’m not crippled.”

“I beg your pardon,” Helen said, hiding a smile. “I never meant to imply that you are. Please don’t throw away anything when you clean your catch. I have a good use for it all.”

Helen decided to use the promised time off from the Mist-Weaver’s lessons not only to get to know the Sin-Eater better, but to start her project of bringing new life into the world. If she were to be denied children of her own, she would plant and tend a vegetable and herb garden while caring for other women’s offspring. *Perhaps I am just longing for the roots I never had.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Leaving a basket of food at the mouth of the Sin-Eater's cave, Helen called out to him. She laid a blanket on top of mossy tree roots and assumed her side of the redwood, which was close to the bank of the stream, waiting for him to join her.

"What did you think of our lesson yesterday?" he asked, taking his hidden place opposite from her.

Helen grimaced. "Maguari has the same annoying propensity for mind-reading as my mother's friend, Judith Altair."

"Mistress Altair is highly regarded among the Hill-folk as a wise teacher and counselor," Obediah said.

"She is very wise," Helen answered. "That's probably why I avoid taking her advice. I seem to be hell-bent on wrecking my life as much as I possibly can. It must be out of that self-judgment Maguari discussed yesterday."

His silence spoke volumes about the sadness Helen could feel in him. "It's none of my business, Obediah, but I have to ask anyway. Why? Why did you become the Sin-Eater?"

"Since you now care for those affected by my choice, it is your business," he said. "The Sin-Eater before me was my uncle. He was the most decent man I ever knew. He took me in when I was a young orphan and treated me like his own son, and I was determined to repay him in whatever way I could."

"By becoming the Sin-Eater?"

"My aunt was dead and I was married with a newborn son when Uncle Jere answered the Call," Obediah said. "I was devastated. In my heart I must have known that eventually I would take his place. I could not bear to think of him damned because no one would eat the sins off of him. My wife and children have paid a horrible price."

Helen's eyes glistened and her heart constricted at the anguish and remorse she could feel in her companion. "It seems to me you

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have paid a horrible price as well, Obediah.”

“True enough,” he managed to reply. “But it was my choice. My dear wife and children did not choose what befell them.”

The flesh on Helen’s neck tingled. “That is not entirely accurate, Hope-Bringer,” Maguari interjected even before he was fully visible.

“So much for private conversations,” Helen muttered. “I can only hope you are not hanging around while I’m in the shower.”

Cackling, the Mist-Weaver floated where both of his human companions could see him. “I have no interest in your daily grooming activities, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand. My concern now is the heavy burden of guilt I feel in our mutual friend.”

He held out an arm in the Sin-Eater’s direction. “All created souls are endowed with free will, Hope-Bringer. Before each soul takes on a physical presence, it chooses its parents and situation. Granted, it does not always choose wisely, or understand at the time of choosing the full ramifications of its choice. But it does choose. And so your wife and offspring made their choices and experience the consequences, even as you did and do.”

Helen hunkered against the tree trunk, stunned. The implications of the Mist-Weaver’s words applied to her own life and predicament both taunted and intrigued her. “I cannot understand or love a Creator who would demand such sacrifice from us,” she interjected. “That does not seem like love to me.”

“That is not love,” Maguari answered. “It is not loving to demand that the one suffer or sacrifice so that the many may be spared or benefit. That is a judgment-based misunderstanding. The Creator loves all equally and has never demanded that one prosper at the expense of another. Never.”

His cowl swished in Helen’s direction. “Nor is it the topic of our present discussion, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand. Why do you seek to distract us?”

Crouched as if to ward off a blow, Helen could not help sobbing. “If I chose this life, then I cannot bear to think how badly I chose and how miserably I have failed.”

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“And just how have you failed?”

She glanced up at her teacher. “Look at me! Hiding from a death mark. Causing my father no end of problems. Detested and reviled. I often think things would be better if I were dead and gone.”

The Mist-Weaver uttered something in a completely indecipherable tongue and others of his kind solidified and hovered beside and behind him. They sent streams of loving and calming energy to both Helen and Obediah. Ashamed of her self-pitying outburst, the former took in deep breaths, feeling as though she had been swimming upstream for hours.

“It is not possible for me to address every issue you have raised, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand,” Maguari said in an especially gentle tone. “Suffice it to say that you see now through the eyes and speak with the mouth of self-judgment. Perhaps you have not failed as badly as your self-judgments would have you fear. Perhaps you have not failed at all, even if at this point you cannot yet recognize this.”

“If you had not come along when you did, Helen, my son would be dead and my daughter dying of starvation,” Obediah ventured. “Your presence here now is a blessing for them too great to put into words. I thank the Creator every day for you.”

Helen wiped away tears. “My mind hears what you say, Obediah, and knows it is true. But I cannot accept or feel it in my heart.”

Maguari emitted a cough-like sound. “Let this be the end of all discussion for now. It is not always wise to dwell overlong on concepts that challenge our current understanding and thus sow confusion and discomfort. We shall meet again here on the morrow. It is time for you both to learn more steps of the *keura*.”

Obediah and Helen took their teacher’s advice. The former retreated to his cave to eat the food Helen had brought him. The latter hastened to the lodge to prepare an evening meal of fresh fish for the children.

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Her stomach in knots, Helen had to force herself to consume a few mouthfuls. She turned her attention to Jeriko and realized the youth's energy felt unaccountably flat and listless. Helen knew better than to query the boy directly about what troubled him.

After the cleanup, Helen accepted Deborah's invitation to play hide-and-seek, the little girl's favorite game. She counted to twenty. Upon locating her quarry, hunkered down behind a chair in the living room, Helen lifted the little girl and tickled her ribs. Deborah alternated between protests and squeals of delight. Major tilted his head from side to side, not quite certain if his duties as guard dog were needed.

As soon as Helen stopped, the child flung her arms around her captor's neck and kissed Helen on the cheek. "You're my Mama, now."

Jeriko shot out of the kitchen chair he occupied and glared down at them. "No! She's not your mother. Your mother's dead. Get used to it." He stormed out the mudroom door.

Sighing, Helen returned the child's caress and set her back on her feet. "I'd better go see if I can talk to him, Sweetie. He's pretty upset. Maybe you should stay here."

Deborah shook her head. "Let me go with you. I need to tell him something."

Helen honored the little girl's request, first wrapping both of them in shawls to fend off the chill air of sunset. They found Jeriko slumped against a boulder at the edge of the stream uphill from the lodge. The brook chattered happily, heedless of its visitor's gloom.

Unable to think of anything to say, Helen stood a few feet behind the youth, Deborah's hand in hers. She abruptly understood that the only too familiar feeling of failure she was experiencing was not hers alone. The boy shared it. That insight was what she needed.

"You're right, Jeriko," she began. "I didn't give birth to Deborah, so in that sense I am not her mother and never can be."

She put her arm around the child's shoulders and gave a squeeze that was returned with equal enthusiasm. "But I can offer her

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mothering. Little girls need mothering. Even older girls need it. I lost my mother when I was eleven and I still miss her to this day.”

Jeriko shrugged his shoulders, refusing to look at her.

“Staying with me doesn’t mean you are a failure,” Helen continued, disengaging from the little girl and stepping closer to her brother. “On the contrary, it means you have brought her—and you—to a safe place. If keeping the two of you alive was your task, you succeeded.”

He clapped his hands over his ears and stalked away several paces. “I don’t want to hear this anymore.”

Deborah tugged on Helen’s skirt. “Let me talk to him. He can be really stubborn sometimes.”

Helen nodded and retreated downstream. The child walked to her brother and stretched to put her arm about his waist. His resistance crumpled; he sank to the ground. Deborah knelt next to him, her arm around his shoulders.

“Helen’s right, Rik,” she said. “I need and want mothering. I want us to be more like we were when Mama was alive and she and Papa were together.”

“That’s not possible, Deb,” he replied, his words muffled by his hands.

“Yes, it is,” she replied. “Besides, I want my *brother* back. Stop trying to boss me around. You don’t have to anymore now that we’re safe.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know. I never thought Papa would leave and Mama would die. But I do know something. If I need Helen, she needs me just as much—and you. We’re in this together, Rik. We should take care of each other, not argue all the time. Please let’s be friends.”

The youth mulled his sister’s words. “You mean you think it’s not charity for us to be staying here?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t. Helen needs us. She’s awfully lonely. We can help her as much as she does us.”

He got to his feet and wiped the dirt off his tattered trousers.

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Deborah took his hand and headed back to the lodge, beckoning to Helen to come with them.

Helen tucked the little girl into bed later that evening. “What on earth did you say to your brother, Sweetie? He’s been acting so differently.”

Deborah yawned and smiled. “I helped him figure out a few things. I don’t think he’ll be quite so fussy anymore.”

Helen kissed her on the forehead and dimmed the light-stick on the nightstand. *How did a child so young get to be so wise?*

Helen and Obediah stood facing each other on either side of the redwood. Maguari directed them to open their hearts as much as possible and ask that their hearts be filled with love.

“The warmth in your chest is the love,” the Mist-Weaver explained. “Claim as much of that love for yourselves as you can. It is very healing.”

Asking Obediah to place his palms against the tree trunk and keep his heart open, Maguari gave different instructions to Helen. “Once you feel that warmth and have claimed your fair share, hold up your hands and turn the palms toward the tree. With your thoughts send the excess of that love and warmth along your arms, out of your palms, and into the tree.”

Obediah gasped. “I can feel it!”

“What is it like?” Helen asked.

He had some trouble putting his impressions into words. “It feels like popping soap bubbles. It’s not like the rough bark at all. It is not, well, solid, if that makes any sense.”

Maguari cackled. “It makes a great deal of sense, Hope-Bringer. Love-energy vibrates at much too great a frequency to deliver the same sensations as the objects in your material state, which of course vibrate but at a much lesser frequency. That is why they feel and seem solid to you. Yet love is as solid as wood—and even more

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powerful, as you will experience soon enough.”

Once Helen had her turn receiving energy, the Mist-Weaver asked his students to place their hands in front of them, not quite at shoulder level, and begin to gather together the seemingly empty space between their fingers.

“Take your time with this,” Maguari added. “Imagine you are gathering leaves into a pile if that will be helpful.”

Helen moved her hands closer and closer, thinking about Erin running her hands over the cutting board, collecting scraps of dough to roll out another sheet of biscuits. Suddenly Helen’s palms seemed to bounce and spring backward. The impression was subtle and fleeting yet very distinct. She shared her experience with her companions.

“I felt something much like that,” Obediah said. “How odd.”

“Keep going,” the Mist-Weaver encouraged them. “Continue to narrow the gap between your hands.”

“The sensation just gets stronger,” the Sin-Eater said. “It almost feels like a ball now. What is going on?”

Maguari gave off his strange laugh. “It is a ball, in a manner of speaking. A ball made from your own energy fields. Even if your eyes cannot see it, it is as tangible as they are.”

He encouraged them to release the compacted energy and allow it to flow freely about their own fields. “In coming lessons we will use these balls of energy to ‘do work,’ as the scientists put it. But for now, we *Oonakim* will leave the two of you to think about what you have learned and experienced today.”

Helen was grateful to take a seat on her side of the tree with only a human companion on the other side. “My brain is like mush, Obediah. Let’s talk about something other than energy.”

She discovered that the Sin-Eater was widely read in all forms of literature. The conversation eventually turned to poetry. “Do you

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care for Stafos?” Obediah asked. “He was one of Azgard’s greatest word masters, in my opinion.”

“Stafos? Wasn’t he Turanian?”

“Yes. Like all the best poets on this island. I’m afraid there’s not much poetry in the Toltec soul. It doesn’t bring riches or make you powerful, so they don’t see much point in it.”

Helen could not recall laughing as hard or as long as she did now. “Surely, there has to be a little whimsy tucked in there, somewhere, buried deeply. After all, my father is Toltec and he’s a hopeless romantic.”

She told Obediah about the case containing her mother’s image that Lord James had worn in secret for years. He had added her image to it after discovering her existence and given the case to her more than a year ago after his second marriage.

“He must have loved your mother very, very much,” Obediah said.

Helen swallowed hard. “Yes, he did. And I like to think she loved him. But I cannot for the life of me understand why she chose as she did. I don’t know if either of us will ever be able to forgive—”

She stopped in mid-sentence. “Kronos. I’m so sorry. Obediah, I didn’t mean to hurt you—”

“I know that, Helen,” he interjected. “Nonetheless, hearing you now compels me to face how deeply my own choices have pained those I love most.”

She heard twigs crackle beneath him as he rose to his feet. He made his excuses and returned to his cave dwelling, leaving Helen pained and confused, wondering if anyone could ever find resolution or peace after wronging a loved one.

She prayed earnestly for an answer before she returned to the lodge.

The Mist-Weavers drifted above the forest floor in their

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customary half-circle around the hefty redwood that kept Helen and Obediah from seeing each other.

“You have been thinking much about reconciliation with loved ones, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand,” Maguari remarked.

“True enough,” Helen acknowledged.

“As we have discussed before, our friend Judith is seeking answers to much the same questions, which also have to do with judgment in the energy field. Reconciliation between loved ones is much easier in the absence of such self-judgment.”

Helen nodded thoughtfully. His words were beginning to make more sense to her, although she had the impression that their full meaning and import remained beyond her complete grasp.

“We are still developing our methods for reconciliation and other forms of emotional and spiritual healing,” Maguari continued. “For now, let us focus on healing the physical body. For that, you have a powerful tool in the form of the gem and the chain you wear about your neck.”

Helen raised a hand to the stone, running a finger along the necklace.

“If you please, remove the jewel and cast your gaze on the metal strands that hold it,” Maguari said.

Complying, Helen examined the chain. With growing astonishment she realized that the links formed various letters from the runic alphabet of High Terzil. She had never noticed that before. She mentioned her discovery aloud to keep Obediah involved in the conversation.

The Mist-Weaver cackled softly. “Each link with its letter corresponds to a part of the human body. If you would reap the fullest measure of the stone’s healing potentials, you will learn to use the gem and chain together. It is not difficult, once you know what to do.”

At Maguari’s direction, Helen focused on each individual segment of the chain. After she described the rune incorporated into the link’s design, the Mist-Weaver named the associated part of the body.

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Helen soon felt lost, wondering how she would ever remember which link matched which body part.

“There is no need to commit all of this to memory,” Maguari told her. “When you pray—that is, ask for—the healing energy of divine unconditional love, allow that energy to move your receiving hand to the correct segment of the chain. Place a finger from that hand on that link, and then continue as you have done in the past when using the stone.”

“How does this help?” Obediah asked, awed.

Maguari gave off his purr-like sound. “The chain works to concentrate the healing energy more intensely on the corresponding part of the body. This combined tool—stone and chain—is simply more efficient and thus quicker, and sometimes speed is of the essence, if a wound or ailment is dire.”

Helen put the chain back round her neck and smiled mischievously. “Any aches or pains, Obediah? I want to try this out and I need a volunteer.”

“It is tempting, but I cannot in all conscience take the risk of you seeing my face,” the Sin-Eater replied. “You should not even be speaking to me, but I am too weak-willed to end our meetings. They mean everything to me.”

Helen pressed her lips together to keep from blurting out that she had seen his face already. Such knowledge would grieve him so much that he might cut off any further contact with her. Their joint sessions with the Mist-Weavers and their wide-ranging conversations were far too important to Helen to jeopardize with an ill-considered remark.

“There will be ample other chances for you to practice with stone and chain, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand,” Maguari said. “Let us adjourn our discussions for now, and when we meet again, we will practice amassing and directing energy to use for various practical purposes.”

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The lone tree stood by the bank of the brook, overlooking a relatively flat parcel of land upstream from the lodge that Helen wanted to use for a garden. Swinging an axe, Jeriko came up beside Helen and his sister.

“When the leaves grow in, it will make the area too shady,” he said. “Vegetables need morning sunlight to grow best. Unless—”

He tipped his head in the direction of the tree and held up the cutting tool. At Helen’s hesitant assent he set to work. He was able to wield the axe in swift, accurate strokes despite his hand wound.

“Are you certain the tree will fall away from the buildings, Jeriko?” Helen asked.

He stopped in mid-swing. “I know what I’m doing. You and Deb go stand where I showed you. Do you not trust me?”

Helen put a hand on the little girl’s shoulder and retreated downstream. Deborah insisted on carrying the baskets of seed packets, bulbs, and frozen fish parts. Helen dragged a tiller behind her and tucked a hoe under her arm.

Not much later, the trunk lay perpendicular to the riverbank beside the soon-to-be-cultivated patch of ground. Helen marveled at the precision of the youth’s axe-work and told him so. Although Jeriko seemed to shrug off her praise, Helen could tell he was proud.

“You’ll have plenty of sunlight now,” he said. “I’ll chop this tree into firewood to season and you two can start on the garden.”

Once she had staked out the perimeter of the planting area, Helen did not find it easy to turn over the rocky soil. She toiled all morning at her task. Deborah laid the upturned rocks along the boundaries of the garden to form a low barrier under the fence Helen intended to set up. When it was time to plant the furrows, she explained to the child that placing a small chunk of fish head or tail next to the seeds and bulbs before burying them would help fertilize the young plants.

It was well past midday before the three reached a stopping point. During lunch, Helen asked Jeriko to cut some of the wood into planks for a fence. She insisted that Deborah take a bath before

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her afternoon nap. Their morning labors had left all three of them sweaty and grime-covered.

“Where do you go in the afternoons?” Deborah asked, trying to delay her trip to the tub. “You’re always gone when I wake up.”

Taken aback, Helen paused, considering how to respond. Jeriko threw her a warning glance.

“I visit the Sin-Eater, Sweetie.”

“Who’s that?”

Helen did not find it easy to explain the concept to a young child. “He’s a very special man who has chosen to live all by himself in order to do others great service. I never meet him face to face. I share our food with him and talk to him from behind a tree.”

“He must be lonely.”

“Yes, Sweetie. I expect he is.”

The little girl’s words trod hard on Helen’s heart. She had no idea how long she would be able to refrain from telling Deborah the truth about her father, and no idea how that truth would affect the child. The similarity between her own dilemma and the one her mother faced many years ago did not escape her notice and only stoked anger and pain that Helen usually managed to repress.

That afternoon, Helen found it hard to keep her full attention on the Mist-Weaver’s instructions.

“To amass energy, you need even more than you can summon in your own heart space,” Maguari explained, directing his students to focus their attention on their power centers and draw energy from that portion of their own fields as well.

“Now, ask for more from the living beings that surround us. Borrow some of their energy and ask permission to add to and blend it with your own.”

Although they were unsure about how to proceed, Helen and Obediah did as requested. Nearby objects appeared to sparkle and

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waver. There were rustling sounds; abruptly all manner of wild creatures stepped out of the underbrush into view. Fox and rabbit stood side by side, as did wolf and deer. The hawk and owl mingled with the sparrow and the dove on the upper branches of close-by trees, under which field mice gathered.

Obediah whistled in amazement. “Hunting just became a lot easier.”

The Mist-Weaver again emitted his strange laugh. “In more ways than one, Hope-Bringer. When you asked to borrow a portion of their energy, you also summoned them. All creatures are drawn irresistibly to the presence of divine unconditional love. They do not fear you or each other in this moment.

“Choose one of the animals gathered and ask to borrow its energy.”

Helen cast her gaze on a wolf and silently sought permission for such an exchange. She soon felt like an overstuffed sausage. Her body seemed to expand and she had to make a concerted effort to draw air into lungs that felt already full—of what she could not tell.

“You consort with the wolf, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand,” the Mist-Weaver remarked. “You feel the power of its energy—the potency of loyalty, fidelity, ferocity, courage, and strength. Now, ask from another animal—then another.”

Helen noticed a rabbit nearby and sent her supplication in its direction. Immediately she honed in on the creature’s intuitive ability to detect the presence of predators and make its escape before it in turn was noticed. She added that aura to her own growing assortment of energies.

After granting them time to blend with multiple animals, their teacher spoke again. “Now, lock the memory of all these feelings and resonations in your heart, in your mind, in your spirit, and yes, even in your physical bodies. Ask and this shall be granted to you.”

Maguari next gave the Sin-Eater some simple instructions. The Mist-Weavers gathered sticks and arranged them into a stack that Helen could also view. Obediah’s hand moved toward the pile. From

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the tip of his middle finger flame spewed forth and lit up the wood. Helen gasped, astonished not by the fire but by the fact that the animals did not flee. Instead, they calmly melted back into the woods.

“Be not alarmed, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand,” Maguari said. “Now that you have amassed energy, you want to use it for practical purposes. Lighting a fire is one such task.”

The Mist-Weavers doused the flame. Maguari gave Helen the same set of instructions and encouraged her to try. Instead of a focused arc of flame, a fireball swooshed from her hand, consuming the woodpile and scorching the ground. The Mist-Weavers quickly snuffed out the fire and Helen tried repeatedly, yet had trouble controlling the intensity and direction of her flame.

“That is your anger, Child of Kronos-Thunderhand,” Maguari told her. “Until you resolve certain of your feelings, you will always have difficulty with anger. Yet it is not at all wise to deny feelings like anger, even though they are not comfortable or you do not think you have the right to them. These feelings can teach you much about yourself, if you will acknowledge them without allowing them to control you.”

The lesson over, Helen and Obediah remained to discuss their experience. “I probably should not ask, but what angers you so, Helen? Is there anything I can do for you?”

Helen told him the truth, laying out her painful dilemma over what to tell Deborah about her father. “I know that your wife and son did their best for a child too young to understand,” she said. “But Deborah will soon be of an age where she could begin to understand. Of all people I should know that a child has a right to the truth about her parentage. I cannot be a party to this deceit much longer.”

Obediah took a long time before replying. “Your concern for the welfare of my children always overwhelms me, Helen.”

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“Our situations are remarkably similar,” she explained. “Perhaps that is the reason for my course of action.”

“Perhaps,” he continued. “I will have to trust that you will know when Deborah is ready to hear the full truth. You have my permission to tell her as soon as you make the determination that the time is right.”

“And if she insists on speaking with you.”

He sighed. “Come with her and I will talk with her, provided she does not try to see me. That I cannot permit. Bring Rik, too.”

Returning to the lodge, Helen felt a small measure of relief from her anger. Yet she was also concerned that, just like her mother, she would be denied a choice of when and how to explain the truth to the child, and that prospect made her heartsick.

Exiled to avert civil war, Helen Andros learns life-altering energy-manipulation skills that could change the balance of power in Azgard. As the plot against her father reaches its tragic conclusion, she flees unknown assailants on a mission to abduct her.

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